

Good Sunday morning from a chilly, cloudy hill in Rockport.....

The Advent theme for today is joy! I don't know about you, but I'm having to look harder and harder to keep joy in my rearview window and find joy in the forward-looking window I can now see through more clearly with two new eyes! There *is* joy in that! I do find myself recalling stories of past incidents that are helping me to stay joyful. Here's one:

A friend of mine told me some years ago about something that happened in her yard. The next door neighbor's little boy came over. He was about 4 or 5 at the time. And he said to my friend, "Where is Angel?" Angel was my friend's 18 year old cat. And my friend said, "Oh, I'm sorry. Angel went to heaven." And the little boy looked up at her with wide eyes and said, "Is she coming back?" My friend, not knowing what the little boy's parents were teaching him about faith and God and all of that said, "Well, maybe..." "Is she coming back?" "Well, maybe...."and isn't that what we all long for? That when someone we love dies, that maybe, just maybe, they'll come back? I've been thinking of this story this week, and it makes me smile and feel joy that I hope, that this little boy hopes, that my friend hopes.... that some day, maybe.... Angel will come back. Joy in the midst of much hardship and sadness and loss all around us is in the words and actions of children, don't you think?

Blessings to all on this third Sunday of Advent in the Christian tradition..... Susan

p.s. I will download today's scripture reading and sermon to my Facebook page later today: freerangepastor for anyone who wants to tune in..... and I believe Margie is also downloading my sermon to Federated's Facebook page....

p.p.s. *AGAIN, thanks so much to those of you who send me your e-mail responses to my writings. I don't always get a chance to write back to each one of you, but I appreciate all your responses! They keep me motivated to continue writing.....*

A simple online worship service for Sunday, December 13, 2020
The third Sunday of Advent
as prepared by Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet
Pastor of the Federated Church of Thomaston

A Call to Worship

(adapted from the Isaiah passage for the day, Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11)

The spirit of the Lord God is upon us,

because God has anointed us and has sent us to bring good news.
Let us rejoice, for God has clothed us with garments of saving grace,
and covered us with robes of right relation with God and with one another.

For as the earth brings forth its shoots,
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,
so God will cause right relation and praise to spring up
before all the nations.

Let us worship God, from cyberspace this day,
but always in the spirit of togetherness!

Amen.

“The Prayer of St. Francis”*

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.
Where there is hatred, let me bring love;
where there is offence, let me bring pardon;
where there is discord, let me bring union;
where there is error, let me bring truth.
Where there is doubt, let me bring faith.
where there is despair, let me bring hope;
where there is darkness, let me bring your light.
where there is sadness, let me bring joy.
O Master, let me not seek
as much to be consoled as to console;
to be understood as to understand;
to be loved as to love;
for it is in giving that one receives;
it is in self-forgetting that one finds,
it is in pardoning that one is pardoned;
it is in dying that one is raised to eternal life.

Amen.

*Although commonly attributed to Francis of Assisi, who lived from 1181-1226, the prayer itself cannot be traced back later than 1912 when it appeared in a French magazine. Regardless of who penned the prayer, or when it was written, its words are powerful, its intent is timeless.... and much needed in these challenging times of ours....

A Reading of Scripture – John 1:6-8, 19-28

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness **to testify to the light**, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came **to testify to the light**.....

This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are you?” He confessed and did not deny it, but

confessed, “I am not the Messiah.” And they asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.” “Are you the prophet?” He answered, “No.” Then they said to him, “Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?” He said, “I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’” as the prophet Isaiah said.

Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. They asked him, “Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?” John answered them, “I baptize with water. Among you stand one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.” This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

A sermon based on John 1:6-8, 19-28 “to testify to the light”

Pray with me. Holy God, help us to grasp what you are trying to teach us this day. Help us to learn what it means to witness to Jesus and to testify to your presence in our lives. Amen.

A Catholic friend of mine told me some years ago that her priest would begin his Sunday homily based on our text for this morning with these words, “This is ‘Yoohoo’ Sunday! Yoohoo, are you out there?” And so it is – John the Baptist cries out, in today’s vernacular, “Yoohoo, are you out there? Can I get a witness?”

“Can I get a witness?” That is *not* a question you expect a pastor ordained by the United Church of Christ to ask you. That’s a question you would more likely hear in a Baptist church, or a church whose congregation is mostly African American. “Can I get a witness?”

In my earliest years of ministry, fresh out of seminary on “heretic hill,” as Professor Glenn Miller used to describe Bangor Theological Seminary, I would *never* have asked that question. That was a question I thought belonged in those very conservative, narrowly focused Christian churches that at the end of every service asked individuals to come forward and “give a witness” to how Jesus had come into their lives and saved them. “Can I get a witness?”

Now, some twenty one years since my being in seminary and twenty years in ministry, I’m much more comfortable asking you, and perhaps more importantly asking myself, “Can I get a witness?” Maybe being of Medicare age now and drawing that nice Social Security check has made me more bold, or more willing to

take risks with my words.... but I'm not ashamed to ask you, and to ask myself now, "Can I get a witness?"

I can't answer the question for *you*, but I can answer it for myself. And the answer is "Yes, I can witness."

I can give a witness to the power of breath, to the power of amazing doctors and medicine for members of my family, to the power of love, to the power of hope. Can *I* give a witness? You bet I can!

Our text from the Gospel of John for this morning speaks of a man named John who came as a witness *to testify to the light* of another. John came to witness to the light and presence of *Jesus* in the world. It is the gospel message, meaning the "good news," of the Christian faith. It is the reason we wait in Advent for Christmas – the celebration of the birth of Jesus, the Christ for those of us who would come to call ourselves Christians. It is the reason we work our way through Lent and Holy Week and come to Easter, the celebration of Jesus' resurrection from the human body to the holy body. We take it all on faith. We have to, if we choose to.

I confess to you, I don't buy all of it – the way the story is told traditionally, I mean. The four Gospels all tell the story of Jesus in different ways. Sometimes they downright contradict one another. How do we know any of this stuff is true? I don't know. Do you? Some people think they know.... but they can't know for sure.

Jesus, apparently, didn't write anything down.... At least nothing has been found of any writings of Jesus. He didn't produce a spellbinding, revealing autobiography that sold millions of copies. He just walked the streets and towns of his homeland.... preaching, asking questions, healing, forgiving those who had done wrong. But certain people spoke of him, and wrote down their impressions of him. There have been millions of copies of *their* writings sold! They wrote down how he affected them, how they were changed by him. They told stories about how they were healed by him, by his words, by his eyes as he looked at them, by his touch....

This guy John came and told the religious officials of his day that he wasn't the Messiah, he wasn't Elijah, he wasn't the prophet. He was just a man, an ordinary man, whose role in life was to testify for another, to witness to a holy man whose life lit up the light of God and shined it upon all people. That's a powerful role for a person to play, don't you think? Testifying to the presence of God's graciousness in the person of Jesus in the world....

What role do you play? How are you called to witness to Jesus? Or if you don't choose to call yourself a Christian, how are you called to witness to the goodness and sacredness of life itself? What shall you do to testify to the light that brings you to church most Sundays? Well, it did right up to March 15th of this year, and it will again, we just don't know exactly when. To what can you give a witness on this third Sunday of Advent, whose theme is joy?

There's a lotta hard stuff going on out there.... and seated right here in our homes and neighborhoods, if not in our pews at the moment.... that isn't feeling very joyful. There's the deadly virus, Covid-19. There's cancer. There's life-taking disease of all kinds. There's violence. There's meanspiritedness. There's political rancor. There's prejudice and hatred. There's economic uncertainty. There's the unknown of what's to come in the days ahead. There's a lot of reasons to feel awful, to feel fearful, to feel depressed, to not feel joy.

And yet, in the muck of all of life's tragedies and traumas, this guy John is called to give a witness two thousand years ago, to testify to the light of God in the midst of the darkness of his days, in the darkness of the lives of the people around him.

Our times may be different than John's in some ways, but in other ways they are no different at all. We're questioned every day about our faith. We question *ourselves* every day. The bottom line is this – do we know how to answer the question, “Can I get a witness?” And if we say, “Yes!”, then what follows? How do we live out that yes?

A friend of mine, Lisa, who is a member of United Christian Church in Lincolnville, wrote a wonderful piece about doors several years ago. She talked about how we open small doors for others. We help to let the light of day shine into dark nights of despair for others. We extend ourselves to others as lifelines when they believe they are at the end of their ropes. We may not witness in words as our Baptist and African American brothers and sisters do so well, but we can sure witness in actions.

The Gospel of John speaks of witnessing thirty-three times, yet only twice is witnessing mentioned in the other three Gospels.^[1] Witnessing – seeing, perceiving, beholding – is crucial to the telling of Jesus' story in the Gospel of John. Testifying to the power of faith is one of the greatest gifts we can give to others – whether it happens with words or with actions or both.

“Yoohoo! Are you out there?” Can you give a witness this day?

Let the people say, “Amen.”

To hold in our prayers this day.....

And hold in your prayers all those affected by the coronavirus and the families of those who have died from the virus....

And all those families affected by the use of addictive drugs and alcohol among their members....

And all those who have worked tirelessly for the building and rebuilding of our nation into one people, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.....

And pray for our President that he might do the right things in coming weeks for the betterment and future of all of us.....

Please hold in your prayers, the family and friends of April DeVarney, a member of our congregation, who died from cancer last weekend....

And for a friend of mine, Judith, and her husband, Eric, who is near death this day....

From a Thomaston resident, please pray for Sean for healing, and for James fighting Covid-19,

Also continued prayers for Ed Lee, Ann Foster, Carol Moss, Fred Bagnall, Harriet Williams, Julie Pollitt, Zeke Bryant, Sally Harjula, Elliot, Trish Perry, Helmut Steger, John Flaherty, George Ng, Doug and BJ Thomson, Heather Van Buskirk, and Michael and Gail in southern Maine, *Please send me the names of those you would like for me to add to this list next Sunday AND those you would like for me to remove from this list.*

A Benediction

Life is short, no matter the length of our days.

We do not have much time to gladden the hearts of those who make the way with us.

So, be swift to love. Make haste to be kind.

And may the Creator of us all, the Sustainer of us all,

and the Holy Spirit surrounding us all,

be with each of you this day and forever.

Amen.

Readings from the RCL (Revised Common Lectionary)

for Sunday, December 20, 2020 – the fourth Sunday of Advent

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16; Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26; Romans 16:25-27;

Luke 1:26-38 & 1:46b-55

Words to ponder today about “witnessing” & “joy”

“Too many of us hear without heeding, read without responding, confess without changing, profess without practicing, worship without witnessing, and seek without sharing.”

~ William Arthur Ward

“Community always calls us back to solitude, and solitude always calls us to community. Community and solitude, both, are essential elements of ministry and witnessing.”

~ Henri Nouwen

“We cannot cure the world of sorrows, but we can choose to live in joy.”

~ Joseph Campbell

“We have to embrace obstacles to reach the next stage of joy.”

~ Goldie Hawn

[1] Gary W. Charles, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 1, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008, p. 73.